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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 001155

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SUBJECT: MOROCCO ELECTIONS: AMBITIOUS PARTY PLATFORMS, BUT
ARE VOTERS LISTENING?

Classified by DCM Wayne Bush for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Less than two months before Morocco's lower house elections, political parties have just begun to promote their platforms, but this is still earlier than in previous cycles. All parties have put more emphasis on their platforms, which generally are more detailed, and they have worked harder to publicize them. The platforms call for promoting economic growth, slashing unemployment, and combating corruption. There is not much difference between the major parties' platforms. Overall, press reaction has been critical of the parties' unrealistic goals, particularly on the economy. However, some observers praised the program of the Islamist PJD as more concrete and realistic. Still, the parties are not likely to inspire much interest or voter turnout, despite the new emphasis on platforms and efforts to get out the vote. End Summary.

New Strategies Aim to Engage Public, Especially Youth

¶2. (SBU) Compared to the last lower house election in 2002, most political parties have issued their programs earlier, and with greater fanfare in the summer of 2007. To date, parties that have released all or part of their platforms include the leftist Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD), the nationalist Istiqlal party, the traditionally rural Popular Movement Union (UMP), the pro-free market Constitutional Union (UC) and the former communist Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS). Rather than making vague promises to improve GDP or produce jobs, many of this year's platforms set out numerical goals and in some cases detail specific strategies to achieve those goals.

¶3. (SBU) At the same time, several parties have labored to create a new, rejuvenated image, claiming to have recruited thousands of new members, grooming younger party leaders -- often with private sector experience -- and using these "young wolves" to present their proposals to the public in more dynamic and appealing ways. The candidate slates issued to date are also in keeping with this trend; several voting districts have seen entrenched old guard leaders replaced by an enthusiastic if less experienced new guard. Parties have departed from the usual format of conferences and rallies, enlisting hip hop artists, soccer players and other celebrities to pique youth interest in party-organized music festivals, concerts and traveling caravans. On the government side, earlier this spring the Moroccan Interior Ministry set up a popular cell phone service for Moroccans to check their registration status via SMS, and launched a new website to communicate news about voter registration and the importance of participating in political life.

¶4. (C) As a result of these efforts, this election season has seen a more lively public debate than in years past in the form of press articles and frequent television specials reacting to the parties' proposals and debating the issues. The government's recent campaign, however, has fallen far short of its target of registering 3 million new voters, tracking only a 1.6 million increase since 2002, and local observers report that many Moroccans remain disengaged from the political process, unconvinced that parties wield enough real power to make a difference in their lives. Young Moroccans frequently tell us they have no intention to vote.

Party Platforms Eerily Similar -- But the PJD Spins Well

¶5. (SBU) In general, the major political parties have focused on popular issues, each finding slightly different ways to describe boosting the economy, creating jobs, and fighting corruption. The leftist USFP (slogan: Choose your Morocco) was the first to release a detailed program in early June, based on 6 "axes" and consisting of 440 different measures, the vast majority dealing with economic reforms. The USFP promised to boost GDP growth to a rate of 7 percent per year, create 2 million new jobs in 5 years, enact legislation favorable to small and medium businesses, and improve Morocco's investment climate. The social sector received attention as well: the USFP plans to reduce illiteracy and cut poverty in half over the next ten years through their programs to integrate the informal sector into the economy, provide a minimum salary to the most vulnerable families, and guarantee government work for graduating students.

¶6. (SBU) Complaining that the USFP had gotten wind of their
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program and copied it, the nationalist Istiqlal party (slogan: Contract of Trust) was the next to debut their program, followed by the PPS, the PJD, and several others. So far, none of the parties have deviated radically from the template set out by USFP, with each articulating similar ideas in ways designed to appeal to the core concerns of their electoral base. If these new platforms are taken as evidence, traditional ideologies are no longer the motivating force behind party agendas: witness the USFP's emphasis on improving the business environment and attracting foreign investment at the expense of more traditionally socialist agenda items. Moreover, similarity among party platforms is not surprising given that Moroccan voters are traditionally motivated less by issues than the popularity of local personalities and long-standing regional, tribal and family loyalties.

¶7. (SBU) The program of the PJD, the most-watched party both in Morocco and from abroad, has been subject to particular scrutiny. Party critics perennially suspect that the PJD's benign-sounding, democracy-friendly public face cloaks a more sinister Islamist agenda, but the new platform raises no red flags: like the others it prioritizes economic and social reform, aiming above all to increase Morocco's GDP growth rate from 5 to 7 percent per year and to reduce unemployment (which currently stands at 20 percent in urban areas) through job creation and better training.

¶8. (SBU) Still, a few things do stand out about the PJD's platform (slogan: Everyone for a Just Morocco). First, they invited to their press conference a group of well-known economists and business leaders willing to vouch for the soundness and pragmatism of the PJD plan. This has lent the party greater credibility, and has helped them defend themselves against accusations of setting unrealistic goals. Second, the PJD conveys a consistent vision-- in itself a relative novelty in Morocco's post-ideological political environment-- and a clear focus on issues of social equity and strategies for wealth redistribution. For example, the

PJD proposed increased taxes on luxury items and the mobilization of zakat funds for financing micro-credit lenders and other revenue-generating activities.

Everyone's a Critic

¶9. (SBU) Local press reaction to the platforms has been mixed. While some have praised the parties' increased transparency, improved communication strategies, and concrete proposals, others have excoriated them for producing unrealistic programs that fail to address the real economic problems facing the country.

¶10. (SBU) The Justice and Charity Organization (JCO), Morocco's large, semi-legal Islamist political organization, has also weighed in on the parties' offerings with a public statement entitled "The Masquerade of Electoral Programs." The group, which has said it will continue to reject participation in the political system but is not specifically calling for a boycott of the elections, accused parties across the spectrum of being ineffective and unaccountable to the voters. The JCO particularly ridiculed the job creation figures promised by the USFP and the Istiqlal party, implying that for these parties to trumpet drastic reforms when they have been a part of the governing coalition for the last five years only exposes the poverty of their own governing policy. A JCO boycott would affect mostly PJD voters, a fact not lost on the government.

Comment

¶11. (C) The parties have chosen to push economic and social reforms to the front of the debate. They also appear to widely agree on fighting corruption, improving governance and enacting constitutional reform to strengthen the role of political parties. This reflects an acknowledgement among political players and sophisticated voters alike that only through meaningful structural reform of the political system will any victorious party be able to muster enough weight to make good on any of their campaign promises.

¶12. (C) Comment continued: More lively public debate on the issues and substantive electoral competition is a sign of increasing party professionalization and the maturing of the political system, however gradual. U.S. assistance may have helped spark this improvement through NDI and IRI-run, MEPI/USEAID-funded party assistance programs. In a context

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of widespread disillusion with the parties and their lack of real influence, voter turnout may be the most important number to watch in this election. End Comment.

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